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FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9220

INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 2292

RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0981

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFISS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0099

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DJIBOUTI 000432

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF, P, IO, S/CT, PM & INR/GGI

CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD

LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PBTS](#) [PHSA](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#) [AU](#) [UN](#)

SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI FOREIGN MINISTER REITERATES CALL FOR
INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION OF ERITREAN INCURSION

REF: A. DJIBOUTI 428

[1B](#). DJIBOUTI 427

[1C](#). DJIBOUTI 424 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: AMBASSADOR W. STUART SYMINGTON. REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D)

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[¶1.](#) (S/REL FR/RS/UK) SUMMARY: Ambassador met with the Djiboutian Foreign Minister, and French, Belgian, Norwegian, Russian and British Ambassadors May 4 to discuss the Djibouti-Eritrean border issue at Ras Doumeira (reflets). Following Djibouti's public call on April 30 (refs A, C) for international intervention to conduct a fact-finding mission to investigate Eritrea's militarization of Ras Doumeira, Djibouti's Foreign Minister is not pleased with the May 2 statement by the African Union. Djibouti seeks strong U.S. and French condemnation of Eritrea, for threatening the strategic Bab-al-Mandeb strait and therefore international shipping. Frustrated with lack of diplomatic progress, Djibouti's Foreign Minister advocates having Djiboutian troops seek to occupy Doumeira island, to counter the presence of Eritrean troops at Ras Doumeira. Norway states that impaired access through the Bab-al-Mandeb strait is a direct threat to its own national interests, as a maritime provider. A multilateral approach is needed to urge Eritrea to withdraw its military from Ras Doumeira and to de-escalate tensions with Djibouti. END SUMMARY.

APPEAL FOR U.S.-FRENCH CONDEMNATION OF ERITREA

[¶2.](#) (S) Djibouti's Foreign Minister, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, requested a meeting with the Ambassador on May 4 to discuss the Eritrean incursion into Djiboutian territory along the border at Ras Doumeira (reflets). FM Youssouf said that Djibouti was not satisfied with the May 2 African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) statement, which, inter alia, "urged both countries to show maximum restraint and to resolve whatever dispute they may have through dialogue." The FM had already met with the French Ambassador to Djibouti, Dominique DeCherf (strictly protect), and wanted France and the United States to release strong, clear statements that Eritrea's military presence and military installation at the border were not justified, as there was no threat on the Djiboutian side of the border. In fact,

Djibouti and Eritrea were "partners, not enemies." FM Youssouf also wanted the U.S./French message to include that Eritrea was threatening the strategic Bab-al-Mandeb strait, which in turn, threatened the world's commerce. Finally, the FM pointed out that the close proximity of troops on both sides of the border presented high tensions, and that the troops should be separated immediately. The Eritrean military should stand down and an accord worked out between Eritrea and Djibouti on the issue, he said.

¶3. (C) FM Youssouf outlined for the Ambassador possible reasons Eritrea had for its incursion into Djibouti's territory. First, Eritrea could be concerned about the Saudi development plan to build a city 15 kilometers south of the border; Eritrea could be attempting to influence this process, he said. The FM noted that the residential project with the Saudis was going forward, and that an aerial mapping firm would be flying over the area this week to get precise land dynamics. Second, FM Youssouf said, the only reason to have a naval facility on the coast, which the Eritreans had resumed work on, was to project maritime power.

DJIBOUTI SEEKS TO OCCUPY ISLAND

¶4. (S/REL FR/RS/UK) The Ambassador and FM Youssouf discussed Doumeira island in the Bab-al-Mandeb strait, a principal strategic position. Should a military installation be placed on the island, it would dominate the strait. The FM said he believed the Eritreans were reluctant to seize the island, as

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it was unquestionably Djibouti's. The FM said he did, however, urge Brigadier General Sheikh Ibrahim Zakaria, the second-highest senior officer in the Djiboutian military, to immediately occupy the island in order to establish a fait accompli. If a (Djiboutian) military installation were placed on the island, any (Eritrean) naval facility on the beach would become ineffective. General Zakaria's response to the FM's request was that logistically, occupation of the island would be difficult to maintain. However, the FM expressed to the Ambassador his optimism that the French military would provide boats to put Djiboutians on the island.

HAMPERING FREE PASSAGE THROUGH STRAIT HARMS NORWAY'S INTEREST

¶5. (S) The Ambassador also met with French Ambassador Dominique DeCherf (strictly protect) May 4, who had recently met with the Foreign Minister on the same issue. The substance of the French Ambassador's meeting with the FM was essentially the same. The French Ambassador told FM Youssouf that the French would call on Eritrean officials in Paris and inquire on the progress in settling the border dispute. When the Ambassador inquired into the FM's suggestion to occupy the island, the French Ambassador responded that the Djiboutian had their own boats to do so.

¶6. (C/REL FR/RS/UK) Later the same day, the Ambassador raised the Djibouti-Eritrean border issue with Belgium Ambassador Gunther Sleeuwagen, who was in Djibouti to present his credentials. (NOTE: Ambassador Sleeuwagen is also Belgian's representative to the African Union in Addis. END NOTE.) He recognized the importance of not militarizing the border or Doumeira island in the Bab-al-Mandeb strait, and of defusing the border situation to avoid undercutting Djibouti's development promise. Ambassador Sleeuwagen was cautious about using the United Nations Security Council, as he said that it would be difficult to sanction Eritrea without appearing to side with Ethiopia (in the Ethiopia-Eritrea border dispute). In addition, the Ambassador pointed out, the populations of both countries were largely Muslim and both members of the Arab League. The world did, however,

have a strong interest in peaceful and unimpeded passage through the Bab-al-Mandeb strait. The Belgium Ambassador agreed.

¶7. (C/REL FR/RS/UK) The Norwegian Ambassador, Jens-Petter Kjemprud, also agreed with these concerns during his meeting with the Ambassador. Kjemprud said that he would strongly urge Norway to support defusing the border situation, stating, "why have access and influence unless you use it?" Kjemprud said that unlike the case with the Ethiopia-Eritrean border dispute, any action that could impair passage through the Bab-al-Mandeb strait struck at Norway's core national interests as one of the world's largest maritime providers, who deal extensively in this part of the world.

¶8. (C/REL FR/RS/UK) Russian Ambassador Alexandre Bregadze and British Ambassador Norman Ling (who was also in Djibouti to present his credentials), also met with the Ambassador. The British Ambassador was briefed on the issues and recognized the immediate importance of resolving the issue, as any incident in the strait would have an expensive and undesirable effect. Collective efforts should be made to keep Djibouti's financial viability as a shipping point, he said. Ling also shared the USG concern in developing Djibouti's port, which was vital to Ethiopia and other investment, and which should not be threatened or undercut.

¶9. (S) COMMENT. Although the Ambassador did not signal to the FM whether occupying the island was a good idea or not, he did question whether occupying the island was sustainable with a token force. A military installation on the island would dominate the Bab-al-Mandeb strait, threaten international shipping, and adversely affect the investment climate in Djibouti. Drought and the increase of the price

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of oil are real concerns for Djibouti. Djibouti's business climate and hopes of private sector development would be gravely damaged should this issue escalate. Close cooperation is therefore needed with the P-5 (especially France), Norway, and Belgium--as well as with Arab, African and other European states. It is in the interest of the United States to avoid a lasting Eritrean military presence that threatens the Bab-al-Mandab strait, one of the world's most strategic points. END COMMENT.

SYMINGTON